

Power and Justice in Humanitarian Intervention: An Offensive Realist Perspective

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Abstract

This article looks at how the United States picks and chooses when to carry out humanitarian intervention. It uses offensive realism as its lens. The central puzzle is simple to state but hard to answer: if justice is meant to be a universal principle, why did the United States intervene in Kosovo (1999) and Iraq (2003) but stay out of Rwanda (1994) and Sudan-Darfur (2003)? To answer this, the study runs a qualitative comparative case study across the four crises. It applies a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), which lets strategic interest stand out as the one variable that changes across cases. The paper tests three hypotheses drawn from offensive realism: strategic gain, rival weakening, and resource control. Across all four cases, the same pattern appears. Where a crisis touched U.S. strategic interests, the United States acted. Where it did not, mass killing was left unanswered. This suggests that Washington's use of the language of justice is selective, not principled. The article also makes a smaller, methodological point. It argues that international relations theory needs to stay close to evidence and observation, a stance close to what some scholars call "barefoot empiricism." By pairing offensive realism with detailed case evidence, the paper pushes back against liberal accounts of humanitarianism and adds to a wider debate on why states intervene, and why they so often do not.

Keywords: offensive realism; humanitarian intervention; United States foreign policy; power politics; Responsibility to Protect (R2P); Kosovo; Iraq; Rwanda; Darfur

Introduction

Justice and power have always been tangled up together in world politics. Liberal and constructivist scholars tend to see international norms as the engine of a fairer order, pointing to human rights law and humanitarian intervention as proof (Doyle, 1986; Keohane & Nye, 1987). Neo-realists disagree. For them, talk of justice, norms, and morality is mostly a story that powerful states tell to cover their own strategic moves. The puzzle at the heart of this paper follows directly from that disagreement: if justice really were a universal principle guiding world order, why does the United States apply it selectively? Why does it justify war in the name of protecting civilians in Kosovo and Iraq, yet look away in Rwanda and Sudan?

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To work through this puzzle, the study uses a qualitative comparative case study design. It compares Kosovo (1999), Iraq (2003), Rwanda (1994), and Sudan-Darfur (2003–2005), asking in each case how the idea of humanitarian justice was used, or ignored, to serve American strategic goals. A case study approach fits this kind of question well, because it allows a close look at decision-making and at the geopolitical pressures behind each choice.

The paper's theoretical anchor is offensive realism. In this view, states operate in an anarchic system with no higher authority above them, so power maximisation, not moral concern, drives foreign policy (Mearsheimer, 2001). Three propositions follow from this starting point.

First, the Strategic Gain Hypothesis: the United States intervenes in a humanitarian crisis mainly when doing so raises its relative power.

Second, the Rival Weakening Hypothesis: intervention becomes more likely when it damages a geopolitical rival, whether a great power such as Russia or China, or a regional power such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

Third, the Resource Control Hypothesis: the United States is more likely to act where strategic resources, such as oil or military access, are at stake.

These three propositions are tested against the record in Kosovo and Iraq, and against the record of non-intervention in Rwanda and Sudan. Treating strategic interest as the independent variable rules out, at least for these cases, the liberal claim that justice alone drives intervention. It instead supports the offensive realist claim: great powers step in only when a humanitarian crisis lines up with a strategic payoff (Mearsheimer, 2001). In Kosovo and Iraq, the language of justice was used to undercut rivals and extend American influence. In Rwanda and Sudan, where no comparable interest existed, the same language went quiet.

The four cases were chosen using the logic of a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD). All four share a common feature, namely severe humanitarian crises involving mass atrocity, ethnic cleansing, or genocide, which satisfies the moral threshold set by the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. What differs across the cases is the outcome: intervention or non-intervention. The independent variable under test is strategic interest, understood through relative power, rival weakening, and resource control. The analysis that follows rejects the liberal claim that moral responsibility drives intervention. It supports the neo-realist claim that states act only when justice happens to align with strategic gain.

Humanitarian Intervention and Theoretical Discussion

Realism has long been a dominant voice in international relations theory. Hans Morgenthau laid its early foundations, and Kenneth Waltz later reworked it into defensive realism. From that base, John Mearsheimer developed offensive realism, a further branch of realist thought (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Liberal internationalists argue that states step into foreign conflicts to defend human rights and meet moral obligations (Keohane & Nye, 1987; Doyle, 1986). The R2P doctrine builds on this idea. It holds that when a government fails to protect its own citizens, the wider international community takes on that duty (Evans & Sahnoun, 2002). Finnemore (2003) makes a related

point: humanitarian norms have grown strong enough that states now act even when their material interests are not directly involved. As she puts it, the international normative context shapes how actors see their own interests, in ways that are both systematic and systemic (Finnemore, 2015). Yet this account has a gap. It cannot explain why the response to Rwanda and Sudan was so much weaker than the response to Kosovo and Iraq. The puzzle of selective intervention remains open.

Constructivists take a different route, arguing that intervention decisions are shaped by global norms, identity, and international pressure (Wendt, 1999). Some scholars suggest that identity politics shaped the Kosovo intervention: NATO states may have felt a closer cultural bond with European victims than with victims in Rwanda or Sudan (Barnett, 2002). This account struggles, though, with a case like Iraq, where identity mattered little but control over oil mattered a great deal.

Classical realists are more sceptical still about moral motives in state behaviour. For Waltz (1979) and Morgenthau (1948), states act out of self-interest, full stop. Morgenthau described international politics as, in his own words, a struggle for power (Morgenthau, 1948). On this reading, human nature pushes states towards power and survival, which leaves little room for moral norms in an anarchic system. Morgenthau dismissed the liberal hope that international law and cooperation could reliably govern how states behave.

Defensive realists such as Waltz (1979) take a narrower view: states intervene mainly when their own security is directly threatened. Waltz shifted the explanatory weight away from human nature and onto the structure of the international system itself. Anarchy, he argued, forces states to put survival and security first, which leaves justice and ethics with little independent pull. Jervis (1978) and Walt (1991) made similar arguments, stressing alliances and balancing over the pursuit of ever more power. Like Waltz, they treated moral norms as secondary, and often as tools that powerful states bend to justify what they were going to do anyway.

Offensive realism, developed by Mearsheimer (2001), offers this paper's main explanatory frame. Mearsheimer argues that great powers try to maximise their relative power, and that they apply humanitarian language selectively, whenever doing so serves their interests and weakens a rival. In an anarchic system, he suggests, regional dominance, resource control, and geopolitical position outweigh humanitarian concern. This is why, on his account, the United States intervened in Kosovo and Iraq, where action strengthened American hegemony, while it left Sudan and Rwanda alone, where no comparable strategic value was on offer.

Mearsheimer's case is an aggressive one: states pursue maximum power because that is the surest route to survival. "The great powers are destined to pursue hegemony," as he puts it (Mearsheimer, 2001). He treats international norms and justice claims with suspicion, arguing that powerful states use moral language instrumentally. Liberal theories of peace and cooperation, in his view, underestimate how deeply conflict and competition are built into an anarchic world.

The clearest split between Mearsheimer's offensive realism and Waltz's defensive realism is over how much power is enough. Mearsheimer holds that great powers maximise their relative

power (Mearsheimer, 2001), while Waltz counters that a state's first concern is not to maximise power but simply to hold its position within the system (Waltz, 1979).

Mearsheimer also breaks with Morgenthau's idea of *animus dominandi*, the claim that humans carry an inbuilt desire to dominate others (Morgenthau, 1948). Instead, Mearsheimer looks to structure: anarchy itself creates strong incentives for states to seize power from rivals whenever the chance appears (Mearsheimer, 2001). On this view, a state's ultimate aim is to become the system's hegemon. Mearsheimer rejects the idea that any amount of security can ever feel sufficient, arguing that states must keep accumulating power against future, unknown threats (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Waltz takes the opposite view. States act in self-help because the system is anarchic, he agrees, but he thinks they seek only enough power to survive, not as much as they can get. "States balance power rather than maximise it," he writes; international politics, in his phrase, is too serious a business for states to chase maximum power as a goal (Waltz, 1979). He draws a line between appropriate power, which is enough for survival, and hegemonic power, which he sees as unnecessary and destabilising. Only once survival is secure, Waltz argues, can a state safely turn to other goals such as profit or prestige (Waltz, 1979). He also warns against what he calls the hysterical Caesar syndrome, in which a state's irrational search for absolute security ends up provoking the very conflict it feared (Wolfers, 1962).

Mearsheimer's concept of regional hegemony adds a further layer: global hegemony, he claims, is impossible without nuclear superiority, so the safest route to security is regional dominance in the present (Mearsheimer, 2001). The United States is, in his telling, the only power in history to have achieved regional hegemony, over the Western Hemisphere. Potential hegemons, he argues, will always try to dominate their own region and block the rise of peer competitors (Mearsheimer, 2001). This restless pursuit of power, on his account, is what drives recurring conflict, fed by fear and uncertainty about what the future might bring.

Waltz criticises this power-maximisation logic as both irrational and costly. He introduces the idea of diminishing returns: past a certain point, chasing more power becomes riskier than it is worth (Waltz, 1979). Sensible leaders, in his view, aim for an appropriate level of power, sufficient for security and no more. "Security is the highest end," he writes; only once survival is assured can a state pursue anything beyond it (Waltz, 1979).

For Waltz, security has a ceiling and can be secured through defensive strategy. For Mearsheimer, security has no ceiling, because uncertainty about the future never fully goes away. "The structure of the system forces great powers to seek hegemony as the only way to guarantee their survival," he argues (Mearsheimer, 2001). Mearsheimer's fear-driven account points towards recurring conflict, while Waltz's more measured account allows for stability through the balancing of power.

The security dilemma sits at the centre of both theories, though each reads it differently. It describes how one state's defensive moves can look threatening to another, sparking arms races that neither side intended. Defensive realists such as Waltz and Jervis treat states as security-seekers first and foremost, not as inherently aggressive. As Jervis (1978) puts it, the wish to feel secure pushes states towards defensive steps that end up alarming others, feeding arms

racism and conflict. For Waltz, piling up power past a certain point becomes self-defeating, since it draws together balancing coalitions against the state doing the piling (Waltz, 1979).

Mearsheimer rejects this reading outright. In offensive realism, every great power is fundamentally revisionist. States seek hegemony and power maximisation, not mere survival, and no state is truly a status-quo state, since, in his words, states are primed for offence (Mearsheimer, 2001). The security dilemma, on this account, is not a misunderstanding between states but a natural outcome of anarchy, where the pursuit of security is itself an aggressive act. The best way to survive in anarchy, Mearsheimer argues, is to take advantage of others and gain power at their expense, since the best defence is a good offence (Mearsheimer, 2001). States do not stumble into provoking fear by accident, he adds; they pursue power and territorial expansion deliberately, because conquest often pays off (Mearsheimer, 2001). As he sums it up, great powers are aggressive not because they miscalculate, but because they understand hegemony as the only real guarantee of survival (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Understanding U.S. Intervention in Kosovo (1999) and Iraq (2003) through Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism

NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo was presented to the public as a humanitarian mission, meant to shield Kosovo Albanians from Serbian ethnic cleansing (Kaufman, 2002). Read through offensive realism, though, the mission looks like something else: a calculated move to boost U.S. power and cut into Russian influence in the Balkans. Mearsheimer's broader claim fits here too. Great powers, he argues, often dress up military action in humanitarian language while the real goal is to tilt the balance of power in their own favour (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Seen this way, the Kosovo intervention weakened Serbia, a close Russian ally, and pushed Russia further to the margins of post-Cold War Europe (Chomsky, 1999). By breaking down Serbia's military strength, the United States cut into Russia's regional reach. The intervention also opened the door to NATO's eastward expansion, a move that lined up neatly with the broader U.S. goal of keeping Russia from regaining ground (Mearsheimer, 2014). The building of Camp Bondsteel, the largest American base in the Balkans, cemented that presence and blocked any easy Russian return to influence (Kaufman, 2002).

The Kosovo campaign did double duty for Washington. It rebuilt NATO's credibility after the Cold War and gave cover for the alliance's expansion into Eastern Europe, which soon brought in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999, followed by the Baltic states in 2004 (Mearsheimer, 2014). This fits neatly with Mearsheimer's broader claim that great powers work to dominate strategically important regions while keeping potential rivals down (Mearsheimer, 2001). By leaning on NATO airstrikes and pushing ground operations onto European allies, the United States practised what Mearsheimer calls buck-passing and offshore balancing, both core features of great power behaviour in his theory (Mearsheimer, 2001).

It is worth pausing on the timing. NATO's bombing campaign began in March 1999, only months after the Rambouillet talks collapsed, and Washington moved with a speed it never showed over Rwanda five years earlier. Speed of this kind is itself a data point. A state that treats one atrocity as urgent and another as a matter for quiet diplomacy is telling us, whether

it means to or not, where its priorities actually sit (Bellamy, 2002). Judith Kaufman's account of the war is worth citing here, because she shows how quickly the humanitarian framing hardened into an unquestioned premise of American media coverage, even as internal planning documents kept returning to NATO cohesion and Russian containment as the operative concerns (Kaufman, 2002).

Humanitarian language, in this reading, was less a motive than a cover. It let Washington justify the intervention while dodging charges of naked aggression (Chomsky, 1999). The underlying goal, from an offensive realist standpoint, was to widen U.S. hegemony in Eastern Europe and box in Russian influence, tilting the regional balance of power towards the West (Mearsheimer, 2014). As Mearsheimer puts it, great powers rarely act on moral conviction; they act strategically, aiming to maximise their own dominance within the system (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Iraq followed a similar script, though the details differed. The United States justified its 2003 invasion by pointing to Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction and alleged ties to al-Qaeda, claims that later turned out to be false. Offensive realism points instead to a more strategic set of motives: extending American military reach across the Middle East, weakening regional rivals such as Iraq and Iran, and gaining a hold over Iraq's substantial oil reserves.

The scale of the mismatch between stated cause and eventual outcome deserves attention on its own. No weapons programme was found. No credible link to al-Qaeda ever surfaced. What remained, once the original justification fell away, was a reordered regional map: a weakened Ba'athist state, a U.S. troop presence sitting on top of the world's fifth-largest proven reserves, and a permanent dent in Iranian room for manoeuvre (Gause, 2009). Harvey (2003) reads the invasion as part of a longer pattern of American power projecting itself through control of energy corridors rather than through territorial conquest in the old imperial sense, a 'new imperialism' built on selective, resource-driven intervention dressed in the vocabulary of security and democracy.

This fits the Strategic Gain Hypothesis closely, since removing Saddam Hussein pushed up U.S. relative power in the region. It also fits the Rival Weakening Hypothesis: Iraq's collapse cut into Iranian influence and reduced what Russia and China could draw from Iraqi oil. The Resource Control Hypothesis fares just as well, given that Iraq held the world's fifth-largest proven oil reserves, a resource base central to U.S. energy security and its wider economic standing. Toppling Saddam Hussein gave the United States a foothold over that oil. At the same time, it let Washington consolidate its military position in the Middle East, weaken Iran, and cut into growing Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

Taken side by side, Kosovo and Iraq look, on the surface, like very different wars: one fought mostly from the air under a NATO banner, the other a full ground invasion led almost unilaterally by Washington. Underneath that surface, though, the offensive realist reading finds the same engine at work in both. A rival's regional position was damaged, American military reach was extended, and a strategic asset, whether territory bordering Russia or oil beneath Iraqi soil, changed hands in Washington's favour (Mearsheimer, 2001). Humanitarian rhetoric supplied the public case in each instance; strategic calculation supplied the private one.

Understanding the U.S. Decision Not to Intervene in Rwanda and Sudan's Genocide through Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism

The absence of U.S. intervention in Rwanda and Sudan, despite the scale of the killing, points to a simple gap: neither crisis offered the geopolitical or resource-linked payoff that might have raised U.S. relative power. The Strategic Gain Hypothesis holds that the United States steps into a humanitarian crisis mainly when doing so serves its strategic interest. Close to 800,000 Tutsis died in the 1994 Rwandan genocide (BBC News, 2019), yet the crisis carried no obvious benefit for U.S. military standing, rivalry with other great powers, or access to resources (Power, 2002). The Darfur conflict in Sudan, which killed roughly 200,000 people between 2003 and 2005 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025), was much the same. It did not threaten rivals such as Russia or China, and it offered no access to oil or military bases (Prunier, 2005). Kosovo and Iraq stand in sharp contrast, since both lined up with wider American goals: undercutting Russia's ally Serbia in the Balkans, and establishing American control over Middle Eastern oil and military position, a pattern other scholars have also noted (Stokes, 2005).

The scale of American inaction in Rwanda deserves closer scrutiny, because it was not simple neglect. Samantha Power's (2002) account, drawn heavily from declassified State Department cables, shows officials in Washington actively avoiding the word "genocide" in public statements throughout April and May of 1994, precisely because the legal label would have triggered obligations under the Genocide Convention that nobody in the administration wanted to meet. That is not the behaviour of a state caught off guard. It is the behaviour of a state that had already run the strategic calculation and concluded that Rwanda offered nothing worth the cost of intervention. Barnett (2002), who worked inside the U.S. mission to the United Nations during the crisis, describes a bureaucratic culture more concerned with the memory of Somalia the year before than with events unfolding in Kigali, a caution that only makes sense once the absence of strategic stakes is taken into account.

Darfur followed a quieter version of the same pattern almost a decade later. Washington did eventually use the word genocide, under Secretary of State Colin Powell in 2004, but recognition never converted into meaningful military action (Prunier, 2005). African Union peacekeepers, chronically underfunded, carried most of the burden on the ground, while U.S. involvement stayed limited to sanctions and diplomatic pressure. Sudan held no oil reserves large enough to matter to American energy planning, no military base worth building, and no rival great power whose regional standing would suffer from American disengagement. Judged purely by the Strategic Gain Hypothesis, Darfur was, in blunt terms, not worth the cost.

The Rival Weakening Hypothesis states that the United States becomes more likely to intervene when doing so weakens a major geopolitical rival. In Rwanda and Sudan, no such rival stood to lose ground. Iraq was different: removing Saddam Hussein cut into Iranian regional power and limited how much Russia and China could draw from Iraqi oil (Gause, 2009). Kosovo followed the same logic, since the intervention weakened Russia's ally Serbia while widening NATO's reach into Eastern Europe (Bellamy, 2002). China's growing economic footprint in Sudan through the 2000s, buying oil concessions and selling arms to Khartoum, might in theory have given Washington a rival-weakening incentive to act. Yet even that opening went untaken,

which suggests the calculus required more than a passing rival interest; it required a stake substantial enough to be worth the diplomatic and military cost of confrontation (Prunier, 2005).

The Resource Control Hypothesis adds a further layer: the United States is more likely to intervene where strategic resources such as oil are at stake (Stokes, 2005). Rwanda and Sudan held no comparable resources capable of shaping U.S. energy security or economic standing. Iraq, holding the world's fifth-largest oil reserves, offered a strong economic pull for intervention, one dressed up publicly as a response to weapons of mass destruction and the wider War on Terror (Harvey, 2003). Rwanda, by contrast, is a small, landlocked country with no proven petroleum reserves and no port. Its military value to any outside power is close to nil. That combination, no oil, no coastline, no base worth building, removes every incentive the Resource Control Hypothesis predicts would draw in an offensive realist great power.

Taken together, the four cases support one conclusion: U.S. intervention tracks strategic interest, not moral responsibility under R2P. Mass atrocity and ethnic cleansing appear in all four cases; what varies is the presence or absence of a U.S. strategic stake. Washington's refusal to act in Rwanda and Sudan reflects that absence, and it undercuts the liberal claim that humanitarian justice drives intervention, while supporting the core claims of offensive neorealism. Put plainly: the deciding factor was never the body count. It was what, if anything, Washington stood to gain.

Conclusion

This paper does not support the idea that U.S. intervention is driven by humanitarian concern alone. Instead, it points to a narrower pattern: intervention follows only when it lines up with the goals of raising relative power, weakening a geopolitical rival, or securing a strategic resource. Kosovo fits this pattern through the Strategic Gain Hypothesis, since its clearest payoff was weakening Russia-backed Serbia and widening NATO's reach into Eastern Europe. Iraq fits through both the Rival Weakening and Resource Control Hypotheses, given the reduction in Iranian and Russian influence and the economic pull of Iraqi oil. Rwanda (1994) and Sudan-Darfur (2003–2005), by contrast, drew no intervention at all, and that gap makes the selectivity of humanitarian justice hard to miss. Great powers reach for the language of justice when it backs up interventions that already serve their interests, while mass atrocity elsewhere, in places without geopolitical weight, goes unanswered.

Four cases, one pattern. That is the finding in its simplest form, and it is worth stating plainly before adding the qualifications. Wherever a humanitarian crisis intersected with a strategic interest, whether weakening Russia in the Balkans or securing oil beneath Iraqi sand, the United States found the will to act, and found it quickly. Wherever no such intersection existed, the same government that spoke fluently about the Responsibility to Protect in one hemisphere fell silent in another. Rose (1998) frames this kind of behaviour as a defining feature of neoclassical realist foreign policy, where systemic incentives set broad limits on what a state will do, but domestic and bureaucratic calculation decides the timing and framing of the response. That framing helps explain why Washington's language never fully abandoned the moral register

even while its actions followed a starkly different logic; officials needed the vocabulary of justice to sell interventions that were, underneath, about power.

By using a Most Different Systems Design, this study isolates strategic interest as the one variable that changes, while holding humanitarian crisis, whether atrocity, genocide, or ethnic cleansing, constant across all four cases. That design supports rejecting the liberal claim that moral responsibility drives intervention, and it supports the neorealist claim that states act mainly when justice happens to align with power. Washington's non-intervention in Rwanda and Sudan, on this reading, was not a moral failure so much as a rational choice, shaped by the logic of power politics within an anarchic international system. George and Bennett (2005) note that case study designs of this kind carry a particular strength: they let a researcher trace the actual decision-making process inside a government, rather than inferring motive purely from outcomes. Applied here, that process-tracing shows officials weighing strategic cost and benefit in real time, in Rwanda as much as in Kosovo, even though only one of those calculations ended in troops on the ground.

None of this means humanitarian concern played no role whatsoever in how officials spoke about these crises, or that individual diplomats and soldiers were not moved by what they saw. The claim is narrower and, in a sense, colder: at the level of state decision-making, moral urgency was not sufficient on its own to produce intervention. It needed a strategic partner. Where that partner was present, justice found its voice quickly. Where it was absent, justice waited, and in Rwanda's case, waited past the point where waiting had any meaning at all.

In short, this selective use of the language of justice is not an accident. It is a predictable outcome of an anarchic system, where moral concern sits below power maximisation in the order of priorities. Offensive realism, this paper argues, offers a workable answer to the puzzle: why justice is invoked in some crises and left unspoken in others. Future research might extend this design further, testing whether the same pattern holds for cases beyond the U.S. record, in the interventions and non-interventions of other great powers navigating the same anarchic order (Dunne & Schmidt, 2017). If the pattern travels, then the selectivity documented here is not a peculiarity of American foreign policy. It is simply what power politics looks like whenever justice and interest happen to point in different directions.

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